



Week Five: Environmental Decline

As the world's environmental condition falls into decline so does the condition of all human life. With a rapidly approaching population of seven billion people, global resources such as energy, clean drinkable water, productive farmable lands and ocean fisheries become overly stressed. In today's world more than one billion people walk at least three hours a day to collect a 5-gallon bucket of water. Entire Third World towns and villages are annually buried in mudslides due to deforestation as a result of charcoal production and illegal lumbering. These atrocities can be curtailed as the church begins to translate Jesus' mandate to care for the poor through sustainable programs and training. It is no longer enough to send aid to the poor; they must also learn methods of environmental sustainability.

Daily Reflections | i61 | Environmental Decline



MONDAY

Caressing the chaos

Reflect

God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature

So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,

And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.”

God created human beings;
he created them godlike,

Reflecting God’s nature.

He created them male and female.

God blessed them:

“Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!

Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth.”

Genesis 1.26-28 |MSG

Receive

To mention the environment at all is to immediately have sewn to our coat a political badge in our current society. But while an environmental issue such as global warming can be reduced to a political party stance by both ends of the spectrum, the Creator continues to call us to redeem our broken relationship with his creation.

All of the earth tells of his handiwork! The sunsets, intricate flower designs, camouflage, insects, the underwater world of coral ... it all sings of the beauty and majesty of our Creator! From Genesis 1 and 2, mankind was given the responsibility to care for God’s creation and steward it well. When sin entered the scene in Genesis 3, the perfect union between mankind and earth was broken, and God’s order of things cracked. But there is hope. As we step back into right relationship with creation, just as when we do with God himself and with humanity, we enter into His powerful love story of redemption and restoration.

What does this original creation story tell us about our Creator? Why is our creation history so unique? Some ancient pagan myths regarding origins stage an epic battle pitting a cosmic lord against a beast of chaos, which is violently slain, and creation spawns from its carcass! Out of the carcass' dead raw materials, comes forth a servile humanity. We are confronted with an elaborately different view of our history in the Bible. For here is chaos, here is the topsy-turvy, shapeless, formless (*tohu'vohu*) of the primordial world, and the Spirit of God descends not as flaming sword or surging storm, but as dove, as the breath of God "hovering over the face of the waters." Or, even more literally, "caressing the face of the waters." No, God doesn't threaten and subdue the primordial chaos like a raging bull in a cosmic rodeo. God *caresses* the chaos. And then he breathes creative word after creative word that transforms it into a cosmos. Next, holding his breath and getting down on his knees, he becomes the Great Potter and Sculptor, shaping moist earth into human form, and then releasing life-giving breath into the first human being.

The movements and the manner of the Creator inform the meaning of his charge to those who bear his image. Humanity is to be a creative, life-giving presence in the world. We are co-workers with God. Our Father works until now, and so we also work, leading creation forward, bringing each part of it into the full melody intended from the beginning.

Relate

How do you connect with God's awe-inspiring creation?

As you look at the state of the world's environment, how are you affected? What emotions are stirred within you? What actions have you been inspired to take?

Respond

Creator God, teach me how to caress the chaos. Show me what it means to be your image bearer in this wide world. Show me how to be a creative, life-giving presence right where I am, rather than just being another contributor to its problems.

Slow down and take a walk sometime today and enjoy His life-filled creation all around you.

TUESDAY

A promise to the earth

Reflect

⁸⁻¹¹ Then God spoke to Noah and his sons: “I’m setting up my covenant with you including your children who will come after you, along with everything alive around you—birds, farm animals, wild animals—that came out of the ship with you. I’m setting up my covenant with you that never again will everything living be destroyed by floodwaters; no, never again will a flood destroy the Earth.”

¹²⁻¹⁶ God continued, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and everything living around you and everyone living after you. I’m putting my rainbow in the clouds, a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth. From now on, when I form a cloud over the Earth and the rainbow appears in the cloud, I’ll remember my covenant between me and you and everything living, that never again will floodwaters destroy all life. When the rainbow appears in the cloud, I’ll see it and remember the eternal covenant between God and everything living, every last living creature on Earth.”

¹⁷ And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I’ve set up between me and everything living on the Earth.”

Genesis 9:8-17 |MSG

Receive

When we hear this story, we often focus on the covenant God made with Noah. But the reality is that he made it with ALL of creation... all living things on earth! It was a legal contract between God and all people and all creation: Never again would God destroy creation through a flood.

God, the creator of the universe, has a relationship with his creation, and an important one at that. A covenant is and was a big deal. The totality of sin was a big enough deal to wipe away creation by the flood, and God’s heart of mercy and redemption was an even bigger deal... that God would save a remnant and promise to never destroy the earth again.

Then there’s the sign... the beautiful sign of a warrior: An archer’s bow of light. As God stretches out his bow, he reminds himself of the peace treaty he made with the earth. The war continues, but his grace stretches over the earth for all of time. His heart is for creation to flourish, not to die and be destroyed. Let us share his same heart for our home, and trust the Great Archer who holds our lives and his creation in his hands.

Relate

What are some ways mankind is destroying the earth? How would the Great Archer of grace respond to this crisis?

Respond

Abba, show me how to step more fully into my intended role as one of your image bearers in this confused, all-too-often teetering world. Show me how to work the ground of creation as you have intended me to, from the beginning. Help me to sense my place in the whole of this world. Through Christ.

W E D N E S D A Y

Earth is polluted by its very own people

Reflect

Earth is polluted by its very own people,
 who have broken its laws,
Disrupted its order,
 violated the sacred and eternal covenant.
Therefore a curse, like a cancer,
 ravages the earth.
Its people pay the price of their sacrilege.
 They dwindle away, dying out one by one.
No more wine, no more vineyards,
 no more songs or singers.
The laughter of castanets is gone,
 the shouts of celebrants, gone,
 the laughter of fiddles, gone.
No more parties with toasts of champagne.
 Serious drinkers gag on their drinks.
The chaotic cities are unlivable. Anarchy reigns.
 Every house is boarded up, condemned.
People riot in the streets for wine,
 but the good times are gone forever—
 no more joy for this old world.
The city is dead and deserted,
 bulldozed into piles of rubble.
That's the way it will be on this earth.
 This is the fate of all nations:
An olive tree shaken clean of its olives,
 a grapevine picked clean of its grapes.

Isaiah 24.5-13 |MSG

Receive

Don't you understand, what I'm trying to say?
And Can't you feel the fear that I'm feeling today?
If the button is pushed, there's no running away,
There'll be no one to save with the world in a grave,
Take a look around you, boy, it's bound to scare you, boy,
But you tell me over and over and over again my friend,
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.

Barry McGuire, lyrics from *Eve of Destruction*

That's it. This slice of Isaiah's prophetic pie will never make it on *any* Christian devotional calendar.

Distressing facts and statistics about environmental decline and degradation are everywhere.

We can find ourselves running the gamut between full-fledged “red alert” panic as we join in the chorus with Barry McGuire’s classic song from the 60’s, or simply going numb as we succumb to Isaiah’s rather gloomy forecast that “this is the fate of all nations.”

It’s overwhelming.

And it should be. When Jesus said, “Today’s troubles are enough,” he was speaking on a personal level of subsistence – food, clothing, shelter – not a global one encompassing the crises catalogued so poetically by Isaiah or screamed at us in online social media and news outlets. The environmental crises of energy, climate change, and food and water permeate the globe and have long-term effects. It was true for the ancient people and it’s true today: the poor will be the first to suffer.

Many downstream issues of poverty can be linked to the upstream issue of environmental decline: deforestation, abuse of natural resources, greedy and careless food production, and a basic short-sided value for consumption that has and will continue to devastate the earth. When you compare the current population exceeding 7.5 billion people, with the overuse of the land and the freshwater supply, the future looks bleak. The curse described in Isaiah, continues to spread throughout the earth in a polluted, encompassing sea that’s out of control.

So where is the hope? The hope has always been in the cross, embodied by the church, the body of Christ. As the church unites to take a stand for God’s creation and brings back his order to the planet, his healing and redemptive power will bring life where there has only been death. Like an oil spill, bleeding out into the oceans of life, the cancer has been spreading. But with raising our voice and taking a stand for the polluted, the violated land, the greed-driven habits of consumption, and the selfish mindset that drives the whole crisis, we can see hope come. The problem may never be eradicated until his second coming, but we can participate in his redemptive story by partnering with him to bring care back to his creation. And in doing so, we also prevent future devastation to the poor, who are always the first victims of global environmental crisis.

Relate

Do McGuire’s lyrics and Isaiah’s poetry describe your mood and take on the state of the world and the environment? What environmental crisis do you experience or see locally? How is God calling you to become an agent of hope for a redemptive story in the wide world?

Respond

Father, lift me out of the ditch of extremes on either side of the road of life – the ditch of fear and panic over what is happening in the world, and the ditch of numbness and apathetic indifference. Plant my feet firmly in the center of the road leading through this world as an agent of your greater story of hope, of revitalization, of redemption, and of the restoration of all things.

Pray and ask the Lord how you can move from being part of the problem, to being part of the solution. Do one small thing this week to work toward that goal and celebrate small victories!

THURSDAY

The invisible made visible

Reflect

The basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being. So nobody has a good excuse.

Romans 1.19-20 |MSG

¹⁸⁻²¹ That's why I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

²²⁻²⁵ All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

Romans 8.18-25 |MSG

Receive

The Creator of the Universe created the earth as a blessing for us. It is his provision; and his resource generously formed for our benefit and enjoyment. And as Paul writes, God's creation reflects him! God's invisible qualities and divine powers are made visible through his creation so that no man is without excuse! These purposes for creation are part of God's original design and his goodness to us.

Now fast-forward to the violating-of-the-land and the pillaging of what God deemed as good. The more polluted creation gets, the more convoluted the reflection becomes of the One who made it. The more we diminish the intended order and quality of creation, the less people can see Him in it.

Creation in itself is an evangelistic tool to bring people to know Christ! Are we damaging the tool?

What if we as believers, were on the frontlines of taking care of the earth and tending the garden so that more might come to see Him and know Him? What if it wasn't just a good idea, but it was a mandate from God to take care of His creation? Where would the world be if the church rose up to do this?

... And the birth pains continue. The pregnant belly grows with size. The coming of our Lord draws nearer and nearer! But it's all just going to burn anyway... right? Why should we spend our time and energy on the environmental crises in the world?

Because restoring creation and preventing further devastation helps more come to know him. It's the heartbeat of the Creator to see us enjoy his creation and to preserve it responsibly. We don't throw our hands up in the air saying it's all going to burn anyway; it will cease along with the other types of separation started in Genesis 3, when humans were separated from God and from each other. So why do we mistreat/mismanage Creation? It's God's heart for us to have a right relationship with him, with each other, and with Creation... even here on earth before he returns. It's his heart. It ushers in the kingdom of heaven and it brings people to see their Creator with new eyes and creates space for his redemptive power to bring new life. So let's get our hands dirty and celebrate his creation amidst the birth pains and the labor groans, the earthquakes around the world and the bleeding arteries of precious fossil fuels. The end has not come yet and God waits so that more may come to know him. How many more might come to know God's perfect peace while experiencing his invisible characteristics at your own community garden or neighborhood park?

Relate

How do you help creation reflect the image of God? How do you hinder it?

How do you see peoples' relationships with creation vary across the earth, in places which you may have traveled? What does it look like to be in right relationship with creation? How can the church do better at fostering this?

Respond

Creator of the universe, inspire me with your creation and redeem that which has been lost. Show me how I can lead people to your quiet waters so that they encounter you through your creation. Show me how I can help restore that which has been polluted or trashed, and help me lead others in how to better care for your creation that is groaning in pain. Help me to make a smaller footprint on this earth so that I can leave a bigger handprint for you, Jesus!

Watch this 4-minute video for a better picture of this scripture and the environmental issues involved:

<https://www.onscripture.com/wounded-resurrection-body-christ-body-earth>

FRIDAY

From birds' nests to oxen muzzles

Reflect

When you come across a bird's nest alongside the road, whether in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, don't take the mother with the young. You may take the babies, but let the mother go so that you will live a good and long life.

Deuteronomy 22.6-7 |MSG

Don't muzzle an ox while it is threshing.

Deuteronomy 25.4 |MSG

Receive

One day a boy in Syria caught some turtledoves and carried them, still fluttering about, to the market.

St. Francis, who was always compassionate to creatures, and especially to animals and birds, saw these turtledoves and his heart was moved.

"Will you give these birds to me?" he asked the young boy. "They are innocent creatures which the Bible says are pure and faithful souls. Give them to me so that they don't go to anyone who will kill them."

The boy was inspired by God and Francis' words and he agreed. So Francis gathered up the turtledoves and began talking with them in gentle tones.

"My sisters," he said, "why did you allow yourselves to be captured like this? You are innocent. You need nests where you can lay eggs and multiply as your Creator has instructed you."

With this, Francis took the birds to a place where he then made nests for each of them. And the doves settled down into those nests and began to lay eggs in that place, where the friars also lived.

Over time they became so tame with the men that they were almost like chickens that had been raised from chicks by the brothers. They would even come and go when Francis would bless them.

John Sweeney, *When Saint Francis Saved the Church*

This story of Francis' dovetails (yes, pun fully intended!) beautifully with the two provisions in Moses' law dealing with particular cases of stewarding nature. It really is significant that God doesn't say, "Be kind to animals," but rather show kindness to the bird you stumble upon and thoughtfulness when you're threshing your freshly harvested grain. He doesn't say, "Be nice to livestock." He says to let the ox pulling the threshing sledge freely eat from the raw grain that his efforts are cracking open. God dwells in the particular, and so must we.

Sure, Paul applies this law about not muzzling the ox to paying pastors, even going so far as asking, "Is it for oxen that God cares? Does he not say this about *us*?" But clearly God *does* care about the ox, just as he cares about the mother bird being treated with respect, "that you may enjoy a long life in the land the Lord is giving you." Significantly, this is the same promise connected with the fifth commandment of the "big ten": "Honor your father and your mother." In God's book, respecting one's parents and caring for a mother bird are linked.

That makes sense when we understand that creation reflects the invisible characteristics of God and his rightful order. God is a god of love, respect, kindness, and order. Loving and respecting the animals and the vegetation around us, is linked with respecting our family members. Let us be better image-bearers by living out His heart for creation.

Relate

How is God challenging you to move beyond the abstract to the particular when it comes to the environment?

Respond

Holy Spirit, deliver me from generic, abstract love that is really no more than sentiment. Continue driving me from the vague, the abstract, the ideal, into the real, the particular, the named. Help me to notice what is before me rather than merely stepping over it or trampling on it. Help me to see and to be a more clear reflection of Christ to the world and may kindness be in my steps today.

Do one small thing today for God's creation that you wish you could do for all of it.